

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

THE ADVENTURES OF
HOLDEN HENG
ROBERT YEO



ROBERT YEO, a poet and playwright, has been described as “the most Singaporean of Singaporean writers.” Yeo has written five volumes of poetry and five plays, dealing with issues ranging from political detention in Singapore to the Vietnam War and the Great Marriage Debate. He has also written essays on cultural policy and theatre, compiled anthologies on Singapore Literature and co-written books on the teaching of Literature for secondary schools. From 1977 to 1994, he chaired two drama committees, the Drama Advisory Committee and the Drama Review Committee which helped to develop theatre in Singapore, and in recognition of this he was awarded the Public Service Medal in 1991.

He has also written two libretti for opera, with composer John Sharpley, and in 2011, he published the first part of his memoir, *Routes: A Singaporean Memoir (1940-75)*. Yeo currently teaches Creative Writing at the Singapore Management University.

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SINGAPORE CLASSICS SERIES

Scorpion Orchid by Lloyd Fernando

The Immolation by Goh Poh Seng

Glass Cathedral by Andrew Koh

The Scholar and the Dragon by Stella Kon

THE ADVENTURES OF HOLDEN HENG

ROBERT YEO



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

Copyright © 2011 by Robert Yeo

Introduction copyright © 2011 by Rajeev S. Patke

All rights reserved. Published in Singapore by Epigram Books.
www.epigrambooks.sg

The Adventures of Holden Heng was first published by
Heinemann Publishers Asia in 1986

Cover design & book layout by Stefany
Cover illustration © 2011 by Ann Gee Neo

Published with the support of



National Library Board Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Yeo, Robert.
The Adventures of Holden Heng / Robert Yeo Cheng Chuan.
– Singapore : Epigram Books, 2011.
p. cm.
ISBN : 978-981-08-9934-9 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PR9570.S53
S823 -- dc22 OCN747746311

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

for Esther

“Love is not love
until love's vulnerable.”

—*Theodore Roethke*

Introduction by Dr. Rajeev S. Patke

THE POET MARIANNE MOORE once described poetry as imaginary gardens with real toads in them: an idea that is at once memorable but enigmatic, but one that illustrates the appeal of all memorable writing, including Robert Yeo's novel. What Moore meant, we infer, was that imaginative writing invents worlds that may be fictive in the literal sense, but when such worlds are well-invented, we find them populated with issues that are very real, that is, issues that are problematic and true-to-life (just as toads can seem ugly and repulsive but are a fact of life that cannot be denied or evaded). The Singapore evoked with such affectionate detail by Robert Yeo in *The Adventures of Holden Heng* constitutes just such a garden, in which we are invited to accompany a hapless hero on a short journey in which he discovers to his discomfiture the toad of amatory frustration.

First published in 1986, and set in the 1970s, the slimness of the story belies its significance as fable. The reader is invited to enjoy the comic ironies surrounding a young man propelled from sexual innocence to a condition of self-awareness which

he learns to recognise as experience: something lacking and needed, whose acquisition proved unpleasant but salutary. It is the kind of narrative which every age and culture rewrites for itself as a journey from sanguine ignorance to sobering experience. Yeo's protagonist is perhaps a trifle too passive to lay claim to the status of an anti-hero. He is also perhaps a little too tame in the upheavals he undergoes to merit the sense of the robustly picaresque. Nevertheless, he is an apt vehicle for several kinds of irony. Here is a young man who remains saddled with a name that points simultaneously in the direction of the adept Hollywood lover as played by the actor William Holden in the film *Picnic* (1955), and the maladroit teenager, Holden Caulfield, from J. D. Salinger's teenage classic, *Catcher in the Rye* (1951). These double and seemingly contradictory allusions to these figures are made ironic by the fate reserved for his character by the novelist: that of a young man who may not quite get the love to which he aspires, who receives, instead, sexual favours sufficient to fulfill many a male fantasy. Yeo's Holden may be naïve in his approach to personal relations, but he is endowed with friends and family whose mild and jollified urgings keep him relatively undamaged; Holden is a young man surrounded by women, who fail to get what they need from the men they keep fending off, whose desire for gratification is hardly ever matched by a corresponding ability to recognise what women think or how they feel. In

short, Yeo's novel is a fable that dramatises gendered myopia through a young Singaporean whom the author would want you to accept as a bumbling but well-meaning soul, living in a Singapore which the author would like the reader to experience as a place in which social change is registered with an anxious awareness of how various modes of life and conduct that are typical of the 1960s and 1970s are constantly headed towards forgetting.

The theme of urban metamorphosis and decay, as well as the dynamic relations between life lived at the individual level of the ordinary everyman and everywoman and the larger life of Singapore as island, nation, community and urban space is an abiding concern in Yeo's writing, linking his dramatic work and his poetry to his fictional writing. This underlying concern is articulated in the poem, *Coming Home, Baby* in terms of the question, "What is the stuff of our history?" to which part of the answer is given in lines such as these:

In the year 1969
 When we discovered
 Our history, it is disappearing
 As rapidly as it is being made.¹

The comic realism of the novel—its evocation of singlets and flared trousers; of couples making their rendezvous along

the slopes of Mount Faber or the quieter locations around MacRitchie Reservoir; of a Raffles Hotel that can make tourists out of Singaporeans—all such accumulated detail remains at the service of an affection that worries over a Singapore perpetually busy in renewing itself, moulting off skins of layered associations which the author would like to chronicle and commemorate. In this respect, Yeo can be said to share with his contemporary, the late Arthur Yap, the belief voiced by many Singaporean authors—that the writer in his time and place must bear witness to all the historical minutiae that his home-city-state might otherwise too readily forget. As with the histories whose demolition is commemorated in Yap's poem, *Old House at Ann Siang Hill*, Yeo's narrative proffers itself as a modest, even diffident, antidote to collective amnesia. The father who would like his children to inherit the old ancestral house captures this aspect of the role of writing as historical witness, just as much as the evocation of the wife and the mistress, neither of whom would like to live in that old house.

The novel does more than treasure its Singapore through the lens of the author as historical witness. It worries and fantasises over a dated feminine typology through an assiduously male refractive index. The hero's anxieties about women, who have modernised themselves ahead of his capacity to catch up with them, worries over the gender politics that treated Ger-

maine Greer as its bible, and dreams and encounters women as keen to ride men in bed as they are to driving them around the city. In this respect, the novel indulges in some very familiar juvenile fantasies. For someone who is apparently inept at romance and sexual conquest, Holden Heng manages to get bedded quite successfully by two of his three female interests, making sexual relief appear more readily at hand than the transmutation of desire into reciprocity in love. To be solicited and found satisfying by an alleged nymphomaniac is as much a part of this fantasy as the fate of being thrown off the slope of Mount Faber into bougainvillea bushes and their thorns. Desire and its fulfillment are as prone to comic distortion as fear of rejection and failure, though no amount of irony, satire or self-deprecation can conceal the pleasure taken by the narrative in the mechanism of fantasy.

The third feature treasured by the novel is the literary sensibility worn conspicuously by the novel on its sleeve, refracting its romanticism through layers of Spenser, Shelley, Tennyson and Stevens onto a protagonist not otherwise distinguished for his literary sensibility. The hedonistic world of Wallace Stevens' *Sunday Morning* gives the novel's final chapter its title. But while the voice of that meditative American poem wondered if the resolute paganism that refused to heed the call to church on Sunday could revel in a nature whose mutability was the measure of its preciousness, the ending of the

novel leaves us with a much more troubling resolution. Having pushed aside the perspective of the male protagonist, it unveils at the very end the feminine side to the fable of love, which until then, was kept away from the protagonist as well as the reader. The novel thus offers, at the end, a partial correction to or subversion of its own male-centered gaze. A novel that might otherwise lapse into the datedness it is so self-conscious about, thus rescues itself from the mode of fantasy to become a more plausible fable of growth into adulthood, a condition made sober after fantasy has been down with.

Dr. Rajeev S. Patke, 2011

NOTES:

1. Robert Yeo, *Leaving Home, Mother: Selected Poems*, Angsana Books, Singapore, 1999, p. 75.

THE ADVENTURES OF
HOLDEN HENG

The Morning After Siew Fung

HOW HOLDEN GOT his name is no mystery. He got it from William Holden. Not the anti-romantic P. O. W. of Stalag 17 but the romantic hobo of *Picnic*, who stole his best friend's girl, played by Kim Novak, from him. When his father gave his first son the name Holden rather than William, he was aware that he had expectations—entirely of the positive kind that had to do with what the name would connote, how the initials H. H. would sound. Although his English education did not get beyond primary school, he was still aware of the alliterative possibilities of the name, but not of the negative association with Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the Holden who was, among other things, not very good with girls.

As a double boost for good luck, especially where girls were concerned, his father consulted an almanac and gave him the name of How Tan which, translated into English, roughly meant “someone who is fond of love”. This he did not tell his son because he thought that one good name was sufficient to live up to. Holden would find out soon enough when he needed another name-booster.

For much of the twenty-four years of his life, from secondary school right up to the co-ed pre-university classes, and all through National Service and university, he did not have many occasions where he found himself having to live up to the expectations of his movie name. Of course, in school, National Service and university, he had trouble from the deliberate attachment of the wrong meaning to the first syllable of Holden, in the sense that he came sometimes to be called ‘Hole’, and it acquired all the negative sexual twists that adolescents could possibly give to it. But he bore the severe teasing without trauma as it was part of the prolonged and seemingly endless process of growing up. There was the example of his classmate and good friend, Raymond, the first syllable of whose name was deliberately mispronounced ‘Lay’. ‘Lay’, of course, took on strong sexual overtones, especially since Raymond showed himself, from the university onwards, to be especially good with girls. The fact that ‘Lay’ had entirely positive connotations, while ‘Hole’ had a completely negative cluster of meanings, did not bother Holden very much. There were boys who had worse names, after all.

At five feet six inches, Holden was of average height and had well-shaped features without being handsome; what could be said to stand out was an unusually slim nose and his habit of combing his hair back without a middle parting. His literary interests ensured that his knowledge of the opposite sex min-

gled sometimes uneasily with his nascent experience of adolescent crushes and the early dating that came with a first job. In contrast, Ray was taller, at five nine, and had thick eyebrows that matched his moustache; his conquest of pre-university girls gave him an almost legendary past and not long after he started work and became financially independent, news of his exploits spread among some of his ex-classmates. His face and speech wore a confidence that bordered on the arrogant.

But there was a particular period in his life when he found occasion to regret going by the name his father gave him. It all began when he happened to meet a girl called Leong Siew Fung on the up escalator of a department store and did not quite end when she turned down a proposal of marriage he made to her on top of Mount Faber late one Saturday evening. Mount Faber was, for lovers, at less than 500 feet above sea level, the highest romantic point in Singapore—provided, of course, one took the trouble to ensure that a proposal of marriage was taken seriously.

. . .

Surprisingly enough, he slept very well for the rest of the morning. But the moment he was awake, Saturday night flooded his late Sunday morning. At about seven-thirty in the morning, he found himself talking to himself, enacting the

mistakes of the night. His lips moved soundlessly. It almost seemed as if he was spared a bad night in order that he might gather strength to put up with the rigours of the day.

POM! POM! Suddenly, he was jolted by the distant but distinct shots of piling. They're starting early this Sunday, the blasted developers, he thought. They had pulled down the row of shophouses off Orchard Road and started piling for the Plaza Singapura shopping complex.

The sound seemed like loud, mocking echoes of Siew Fung's rejection. Except that her reply lacked the resonance of metal being hammered into the ground.

"No lah," she had said, almost casually to his proposal. He was flabbergasted.

"What, what do you mean by 'no lah'?" he had demanded.

"Not tonight, please Holden," she had said.

"Of course not tonight. I'm not asking you to marry me tonight—"

"Oh, you are not?" her quick answer had come. "Then, it's okay, I can say no."

"No, no, I don't mean that. I mean, you don't have to marry me tonight, but I am asking you to marry me tonight, I mean I am proposing to you tonight. Now."

She had turned away from him.

"Please Holden, can I think this over?"

"Think over!" he had almost shouted. "But last week, last

Saturday, on this same spot you told me to ask you again one week later."

"Yes, I did, but I did not say what my answer was going to be."

"No, you didn't, but the way you said it—"

"How did I say it?" she had asked archly.

"Well, you indicated that if I proposed you would..."

"Would what?"

"Would say 'yes'."

"Did I?"

They had driven home in utter silence that night. When they arrived, he stopped his engine and looked ahead. She touched his cheek and said gently, "Don't feel so bad, Holden."

He had not replied. She got out of his car, leaned in and said, "Why don't you call me tomorrow?"

In reply, he had abruptly started his car and revved off.

He was not quite sure how knowledge about his proposal came up after breakfast the next morning.

"You mean you actually proposed to her?" came his younger brother's disbelieving question. Curtis, fifteen and doing his "O" levels this year, was fond of teasing his brother. Holden stayed silent.

"Then you deserved to be turned down," said the same voice. Curtis' voice was beginning to sound particularly irksome.

"Come on, lah, hiah. You mean you don't know that? Nowa-

days you don't actually propose to the girl you want to marry. I mean, it's all taken for granted and all you have to do is to set the wedding date, pick a restaurant and tell the old folks. The proposal is a formality. The girls don't mind the courting, but the proposal is old-fashioned, pre-historic."

Holden remained silent.

"I mean, if you actually said, 'Will you marry me?' then you deserve to be jilted. You don't give a bird a chance to say no like that. She's sure to fly. What's come over you, hiah?"

Holden didn't know which stung most. His younger brother addressing him as hiah, meaning older brother, or his line of questioning which was definitely not respectful.

"And he has to do it on top of Mount Faber." It was his sister this time, seventeen and smart-alecky. Her name was Mayo. Oh, how he wished he had an older brother. He enjoyed being elder brother, the respect given to him as first-born, the form of address to which he was entitled, and other priorities and civilities. But not at moments like this. He dreaded what she was going to say next.

"You popped the question to a girl on the highest point in Singapore—"

"Not the highest point lah, chea; the highest point is Bukit Timah, and you don't propose there."

"You know what I mean—the highest civilised point. But it's not exactly the highest point in your life."

Holden bit his lips at this point. Why are they, his younger siblings, so bloody witty today?

"Don't tell Mum, okay?" Holden finally managed.

"Okay," said Mayo. "If she knows, she'll get really angry. She's always told you not to get involved with Cantonese girls."

"What about the old man?" asked Curtis.

"Why worry about him?" Mayo queried. "If we know Ah Pa, he will think it's a good thing you're jilted. It will make you stronger to tackle the next girl. Nothing like experience what, he always says."

And, after a pause, she added encouragingly, "Not to worry, hiah. Learn from the old man, lah. He can teach you a thing or two."

Throughout the day, he could think of nothing except what happened last night. Could it be that she rejected him because she didn't like his name? The thought struck him suddenly. Holden Heng. He hadn't been really happy with the name his father had given him, nor with his explanation.

When he was old enough to realise the significance or insignificance of names, he had asked his father. The old man volunteered eagerly. He was twelve then.

"Well," his father said, "your name come from William Holden."

"William Holden is the actor, is it?" he asked.

"Yah, it is. From the picture *Picnic*—"

“Oh, I know, I know. He steals Kim Novak from her boyfriend, is it? My friends tell me. But why you call me Holden, not William? William is better.”

“No use, no use. William so common, Holden so lomantic.”

Holden’s fluent recall was forced to pause at his father’s mispronouncement. The pause threatened to become an interval. But his anger at his father’s explanation was such that he had to resume his reminiscing. Resuming was his feeble way of getting at his father.

“Holden so lomantic,” his father had repeated. “Holden Heng. Afterward, you can sign your name H. H. also very stylish. If your name Holden, sure good with woman. I got friend his name William and he not so good with woman. His wife leave him for another man, because he got wrong name. That’s why I call you Holden, Holden.”

Holden winced at the recall of his repetition. It now seemed so witless. Poor father, he thought. So proud of his virility but unable, until Holden came along, to coax a male heir from his first wife who was unable to provide him with children and whom he subsequently divorced. Two boys and a girl came from his second wife.

It was the same story when his sister came. She got her name from Virginia Mayo, who was in the movie *The Silver Chalice*, with Paul Newman. He had found out that his father was rather attracted to the name Virginia until he discovered,

from one of his friends, an English teacher, what the name suggested. So Mayo it was. “Call Mayo sure to remember,” his father had rationalised.

The old man was bowled over by Paul Newman’s good looks in the same movie and would probably have named his next son Newman had not his mother failed to co-operate.

After Mayo had come Curtis. He had wondered about that name for his younger brother and thought a lot about his father’s peculiar habit of naming his children not only after famous film-stars but after their surnames rather than their first names. Not Tony but Curtis. He guessed it had to do with the surnames being less common. When he asked, his father’s explanation confirmed his guess.

“What for Tony, so common. Curtis more better. Everyone want to call his son Tony but everyone remember Curtis better. Curtis Heng cannot forget, but Tony Heng—nobody remember.”

“Tony Curtis in what picture, Pa?” asked Holden.

“Oh, I think *The Prince who was a Thief*,” said his father.

He wondered, ruefully, whether his father ever thought what it would mean to have to live up to a famous name. He thought of his friend Alexander Tan, who was thin and timid. Or Arjuna, who wore glasses and liked nothing better than to spend all of his school time in the Chemistry lab. His mind roved over girls with names like Helen and Aphrodite (yes, he had recently met one) and wondered how they coped with

such demanding names.

That night, when he picked up Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* again, which he had not read since his pre-university days, he realised that there was a new dimension to living up to a name, or more precisely, living it down. Poor Holden Caulfield, confused adolescent! And poor Holden Heng, equally confused and in his belated adolescence, in spite of being only twenty-four, having graduated three years ago from the University of Singapore with English as one of his Honours subject! Could it be that his father—but no, he stifled the thought that his old man could have read *The Catcher in the Rye*. If he had, he ruefully ruminated, he might have given his son another name.

But beyond this, Holden could not concentrate. He was hoping Siew Fung would call; it was the least she could do after the way she behaved. But by dinner time and there was no word, he found himself dying to call her. He remembered her words, 'Why don't you call me tomorrow?', but pride struggled with his sense of having been wronged, and won.

The phone rang and he started but heard Curtis say, "Hiah, it's for you. Ray."

Holden went reluctantly to the phone.

"Hey, how's the engaged man? Did Mount Faber go up in flames?"

"Engaged what! She ditched me, la, shit."

"What happened? Didn't you pop the question?"

"Yes, I did, but she said, 'Not tonight, please'."

"Well, don't say I didn't tell you. I told you she wasn't ready. And even if she was, you don't actually propose like that. You are a real jinx, man; don't you go jinxing Mount Faber, or it would be unfit for lovers."

"Seriously, Ray, if you don't propose, what do you do?"

"You get her into a position where marriage is the only way out."

"How do you mean? Get her pregnant?"

"No, that's not your style. You get a new car. But before you do, you consult her. Make it appear that you are getting this car because of her."

"But I've just got a new car, less than a year old."

"So what! Sell that and buy another. Ask her if she likes cars, other than the one you have. Or better still, book an apartment or house. Throw hints like that. What do you want an apartment for, unless to share it with somebody? Be indirect, lah. Once she takes the hint, you don't have to propose. It becomes a matter of course."

"You think so, huh?"

"Well, it worked with one of my birds. Remember Jenny? She was even willing to help with the deposit for a terrace house, but I wasn't all that keen. Take it from me, Holden, the birds are romantic and ready to fly, but they also want some place they can perch."

Holden was silent, taking all this in.

“Did you break up for good?”

“No, she asked me to call her.”

“Why not? You indicate to her that you are cut up, but that’s not the end of you. Start going out with other dames and show her how you are recovering.”

“You’re sure it’s okay?”

“Sure, I’ve done it many times. But don’t date her again, okay? Treat her as taboo, from now on.”

“But why?”

“Come on, you’ve got to play hard to get sometimes.”

All In a Game

“TREAT HER AS taboo.” These words reverberated in his heart. He felt sorely tempted to telephone her many times, at home, in the office, as Ray had said that it was okay to call. He supposed Ray meant that it was all right to call as long as he did not ask for a date. Every time he thought about ringing her, his heart beat faster.

One weekday night, after dinner, he was determined to call her. But what was he going to say? And what he was going to say, in turn, depended on what she was going to say. She had asked him to call, after all, and so he thought he would let the conversation roll from there. But he felt more comfortable if he could rehearse, seated beside the telephone.

“May I speak with Siew Fung, please?”

“Oh, is that you, Holden?”

“It’s me.”

“Why did you take so long to call? I was waiting for your call the next day.”

“Were you?”

“Yes, I asked you to call me, didn’t I?”

“But after—”

“After what?”

“After you’ve turned me down—”

“I know I turned you down, but we can still be friends, can’t we?”

“Friends!” he almost shouted.

That jerked him out of his imaginary world. He became aware of Curtis looking at him, wanting to use the phone.

“Come on, hiah, you want to use the phone or not?”

Holden made way for him and went to his bedroom. Siew Fung followed him in his thoughts. He turned the conversation over to see how it would sound this time.

“Siew Fung, please.”

“This is Siew Fung speaking. Oh, it’s you Holden.”

“Yes, it’s me. Are you watching TV?”

“No.”

“You asked me to call.”

“Yes I did. I was afraid you won’t forgive me. Are you mad at me?”

“No,” he heard himself saying.

“Why did you just drive off last night?”

“I’m sorry if I was rude.”

“It’s okay, lah. I understand what you did. But I’m glad you’re not mad at me. Perhaps we should go for a drink.”

“You mean now?” he heard himself saying eagerly.

But knocks on the door and Curtis crying, “I’m finished, the phone is yours,” deprived him of Siew Fung’s answer. Well, he was going to find out now.

He dialled her number. A teenage girl’s voice answered.

“Is Siew Fung in, please?”

“No, she’s not. Who’s speaking please?”

“It doesn’t matter...” he stammered.

“Do you want to leave a message?”

“Er, no thanks, I’ll call again.”

And he put down the receiver in frustration. All that rehearsal for nothing.

He looked at the clock. Nine-thirty at night. Where could she have gone to? And if she did not come back soon, it’d be too late to call.

He sat down to listen to the news on TV. “There has been an alarming rise in suicides among young female Singaporeans in the last ten years, according to a social worker. She said this at a seminar on Urbanisation and Women in Singapore. The principal factor appears to be an inability to cope with a broken love affair, in addition to other pressures.”

Holden’s heart reached out for these girls, partly in sorrow and partly in exasperation. Die over a love affair? He thought, for all his romantic notions, that was rather extreme, if not silly, to say the least. He remembered his pre-university teacher, a hardened but wise bachelor named Mr. Koh, quote Shake-

speare with approval: “Men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them—but not for love.”

The girls who killed themselves must be pretty vulnerable. He recalled reading an article which compared the process of falling in love leading up to marriage with studying in school to obtain a certificate. The point of that article, he remembered, was that one has to be schooled in love—there was no other way except the practical way. The jilted person learned how to cope with unrequited love, picked up the rules that toughened him. He may end up, after learning, with a certificate, that is, marriage; or he may end up a dropout, that is, suicide. He racked his mind for the third alternative—the bachelor, or spinster, who had learned the lessons of love and decided they were too difficult to follow. These were the people left on the shelf.

What an awful image. As if single people were immobile and helpless. He supposed they got that way because they had, after a point, refused to play the game of love. And their refusal may have hardened into cynicism or even hatred for the opposite sex.

He swore that he would not be prey to such an emotion. He certainly did not envisage remaining a bachelor, like Mr. Ho, another former teacher, who needed annual visits to Haadyai or Bangkok in order to inexpensively find his manhood. Leaving suicide aside, he must admit that his options had narrowed, that he must school himself in love. And, damnit, wasn't Siew Fung a good teacher?

Then he heard the phone ring and Curtis saying, “I think it's Siew Fung. Maybe she's changed her mind and wants to marry you.” Raucous laughter followed.

Holden's heart thumped as he went for the phone. He had rehearsed him calling her but not she calling him. What was she going to say?

“Hello,” he managed weakly.

“It's me. Don't sound so mournful lah. It's not the end of the world.”

“I'm not mournful.”

“Good. How are you feeling?”

“You mean after that night?”

“Yes.”

“Suffering,” he articulated.

“Poor thing. How badly?”

“Very.”

“Really? Would it make you feel better if—”

“If what?”

“If I had said ‘yes’?”

“How can you joke with me now, after that night?”

“Honest, I'm not joking, Holden. But you sounded so funny, with your eyes so glassy and your voice choking. I thought you were serious.”

“What do you mean you thought I was serious?” he almost screamed.

“You don’t have to shout.”

He was really taken aback. What game was she playing?
What did she mean by asking if she thought he was serious?

“Was that the first time you proposed to a woman?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Holden?”

“Why, would it have made a difference?”

“No, but—”

“But what?”

“I would have said no differently.”

His hands went weak as the receiver slumped on the table. He heard her voice calling him, adding to his confusion. He didn’t know how he did it, but he did it. He put the receiver back slowly and then walked away to his room.

‘Tis Better To Have Loved and Lost

FOR ALL THAT he tried, he could not keep Siew Fung off his mind. To “treat her as taboo” as Ray advised, was easier said than done. It was natural enough for him who attracted women like boys to mango trees during the season. But after the last conversation, he couldn’t bring himself to call her again. It was wounded pride, of course, but he also felt that perhaps there was no point in pursuing the relationship. It was time to cut her off and start anew.

But with whom? It was Saturday today, and now, for the second Saturday since he was jilted, he was beginning to think of how to spend the hours after dinner. Or, precisely, who to spend it with. When he was going steady with Siew Fung, this was not a problem. They would inevitably talk or see one another in the middle of the week, Wednesday or Thursday, and decide on what to do on the coming Saturday. He liked the certainty. He revelled in having a regular girl and not having to chat up a new girl, though that had its advantages. But it could not compare with the thought of a weekend expectation with the girl of your choice and having that satisfied. It was more

than expectation, it was the smooth performance of an unspoken compact between lovers, an indulgence in an attitude that both took for granted without having to discuss it.

But today? He looked at his watch. Six o' clock in the evening and nothing arranged, no quiet whirr of expectation, whistling before his bath his favourite melodies. Years after it first became a hit, "Feelings" remained a favourite. Ray had mentioned the possibility of a last minute blind date tonight and he had agreed to it without much enthusiasm. But there had been no call so far.

Curtis was in the bathroom and Holden allowed his mind to latch upon Siew Fung. He remembered the first time they had met. He was going up the escalator at Metro Orchard and had hardly noticed a fair-complexioned girl in a beige pantsuit before him. Suddenly, there was the sound of garment tearing and a feminine shriek and before he knew it, he had to practically jump over the girl in the beige pantsuit kneeling to attend to the edge of her pants which had been caught in the escalator. Fortunately, they were at the end of the escalator, but he grazed her shoulder hard.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh, my God," she said, looking at the shredded piece and trying to retrieve it.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, it's all right."

He saw her bending and people coming up the escalator and said, "Be careful. Why don't you let me get it? Give me your hand."

She did and he pulled her up gently. She looked pale and a little shaken.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, thanks."

"What about your...?" he asked with concern.

"It's all right, it's no use now." And she looked at the torn part of her pants. She was pretty, he noticed, and pale. She wore her hair in a bun with strands attractively fluttering immediately below her ears. There were broad hints of dimples on her cheeks.

He noticed with delight that relative whiteness of her skin brought out sharply the rose-red lipstick and matching painted fingernails. She had a lovely heart-shaped face without too pointed a chin and was of medium height, probably above five feet four.

"I hope I didn't knock you too hard," he said.

"No," she replied and smiled and he noticed two lovely dimples. "But thanks for helping. I'm Siew Fung."

"I'm Holden."

"Pardon?"

"Holden. It's spelled H-o-l-d-e-n."

"Oh, hi Holden! Can I help you? I'm working here."

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank friends who have helped: Ho Minfong and Edwin Thumboo for invaluable advice; Andy Kirkpatrick, colleague and informed reader; Malcolm Bosse who urged me on; and Edmund Wee who first broke the news.

31 December 1983 & 9 October 1984

Singapore

This second printing has provided me with the opportunity to make a few revisions to the text first published in 1986. This version may be regarded as almost final.

14 September 1987

Hyderabad, India

This second edition has enabled me to make a few improvements.

3 August 2011

Singapore

PRAISE FOR
THE ADVENTURES OF
HOLDEN HENG

“...an impressive Singaporean novel, humorously serious.” —WORLD LITERATURE TODAY

“The pace of *Adventures* is fast and the language is decorous. The depiction of Singapore and its social mores is incisive.” —ASIAWEEK

“Holden Heng is a picaresque hero assembled in the flatted factory of third world fiction... In his parody of the penchant to imitate, Yeo is strikingly original.” —SOLIDARITY

“Immensely entertaining...a frank and fun assessment of sexuality and relationships that still feels fresh today.” —THE SUNDAY TIMES

ISBN 978-981-08-9934-9



9 789810 899349